

## **What is a meningococcal infection?**

Meningococcal infections are caused by a type of bacteria called *Neisseria meningitidis* (also known as “meningococci”). A very small number of people exposed to this organism develop a serious illness from it, such as meningitis (swelling of the tissues around the brain).

## **What are the symptoms of meningococcal infection?**

Symptoms of meningococcal infection may include fever, chills, headache, muscle aches, stiff neck, nausea, vomiting, sleepiness or confusion, and/or a characteristic skin rash.

## **How is this infection spread?**

Meningococci are spread by direct contact with secretions from the nose and throat of an infected person. Spread is almost always by close contact with a person who is **not** ill (an asymptomatic carrier). Close contact includes activities such as kissing, or sharing drinking glasses, eating utensils, cigarettes, or toothbrushes.

These bacteria do not survive for more than a few minutes on environmental surfaces such as tables, chairs, clothing, etc. Casual contact such as occurs in a classroom or office setting is not usually significant enough to spread disease.

## **How long is a person contagious and how soon do the symptoms appear?**

A person may transmit the organism from the time that the person is first infected until the bacteria are no longer present in the nose and throat. Symptoms of infection may appear two to ten days after exposure, but usually within five days.

## **Can meningococcal infection be treated?**

Antibiotics are generally effective in treating meningococcal infection. However, even with appropriate therapy about 10% of the people who have a meningococcal infection die and 20% have permanent complications, such as hearing loss, brain injury, or loss of a limb.

## **Should people who have been in contact with someone diagnosed with meningococcal illness receive antibiotics even if they are not sick?**

Only people who have been in close contact with the ill person need to receive antibiotics. Close contacts are people who have exchanged respiratory or oral secretions with the ill person through activities such as kissing, or sharing drinking glasses, eating utensils, cigarettes, or toothbrushes. These are generally household members, intimate contacts, and close friends. In these persons, the organism can be eliminated from the nose and throat by taking an antibiotic. This primarily reduces the potential for spreading the bacteria to others and may prevent illness.

## **Is there a vaccine to prevent meningococcal infection?**

In the United States, a vaccine is available that protects against certain strains of the bacteria. Vaccination is currently recommended for young adolescents at their routine preadolescent visit (11-12 years of age) as well as any unvaccinated adolescents at high school entry (15 years of age). Vaccination is also recommended for military recruits, college freshmen who are living in dormitories, and persons with certain health conditions (e.g., damaged spleen).

The vaccine is also used in outbreak situations and for persons who are traveling to areas of the world where high rates of the disease are known to occur. Others who want to decrease their risk of meningococcal infection may also get the vaccine.

**Where can I get more information?**

You may contact your doctor or local health department if you would like more information.

